DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 139 217 EC 100 792

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TITLE Variables Affecting Delivery of Exceptional Child Services to Rural Areas and Suggested Educational Approaches.
PUB DATE Apr 77
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Convention, The Council for Exceptional Children (55th, Atlanta, Georgia, April 11-15, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Delivery Systems; Early Childhood Education; Elementary Secondary Education; Exceptional Child Services; *Handicapped Children; *Rural Education

ABSTRACT

Discussed are such variables affecting delivery of services to exceptional children in rural areas as incidence of handicapping conditions, family size, transportation, and communication; and recommended are such educational approaches to the problem as personnel recruitment, parent involvement, mainstreaming, and multi-system cooperation. (IM)

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VARIABLES AFFECTING DELIVERY OF EXCEPTIONAL CHILD SERVICES TO RURAL AREAS AND SUGGESTED EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES

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Introduction

In a 1971 speech to a Council for Exceptional Children conference in Memphis, Tennessee, Foster stated that "problems found in small, rural districts are of the same kind as those found in urban areas, and only differ in magnitude or extent". Although his statement has some validity, areas of concern remain. Even though exceptional children in rural parts of the country are recognized to have the same basic needs as all children, several differences become apparent when delivery of services to these areas is examined.

Hewett(1974) provides a concise treatment of the history of special education in this country. A special class for the retarded was held in Cleveland in 1875, and by 1905, Chicago, New York, Providence, Springfield, Philadelphia, Boston, and Portland had began special education classes for the mentally retarded. This pattern continued with population centers spearheading the movement. Wilson Dietrich, in a 1976 speech to a topical conference on delivery of special education services to rural areas stated "We are making a serious mistake if we do not learn from history. Rural programming, instead of being at a disadvantage for getting 'into the action' late can make extremely rapid progress by utilizing objective evaluation of urban programs, learning not only from the good, but also from the 'not so good'".

Heller (1975) suggests that the literature virtually ignores service delivery to rural areas while state and federal education agencies are primarily concerned with the urban areas. Yet the

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problems in providing appropriate services to exceptional children in sparsely populated areas are equally as difficult (if not more) as those of the more metropolitan areas.

Variables Affecting Delivery of Educational Services to Rural Areas[1]

Incidence

Incidence figures may centralize in certain regions for a given area of exceptionality. For example, when the educable mentally retarded child is defined to include the culturally deprived[2], several southeastern states, especially those in the Appalachian area, probably have a much greater per capita educable retarded population than many other parts of the country due to the concentration of lower class culturally deprived persons. The large number of private schools that tend to siphon off middle class children increases the percentage of lower class children (many of whom probably would be classified as culturally deprived) who remain in public schools. Further, many middle class people, upon reaching graduation from high school, tend to leave such geographical areas in search of regions with more productive employment opportunities. Heller (1975) referred to this phenomenon as rural flight. This vicious cycle perpetuates the significantly large number of culturally deprived children. Another factor contributing to this cycle is the reproduction rate of the lower class segment of the population. While lower class families reproduce at a significantly high rate, middle class families are exercising contraceptive restraint in limiting their number of children to approximately two per marriage.

1 Culturally deprived children are emphasized throughout the article due to the significant proportion of the exceptional child population that they constitute.

2 The author does not argue whether the culturally deprived child should be defined as educable mentally retarded; he merely recognizes the large number of such children that are placed in educable classrooms.

Another situation contributing to the increased need for special services in rural areas is the trend toward deinstitutionalization occurring in the mental health field. Many mentally retarded and emotionally disturbed persons who in the past have been institutionalized are now remaining in the community under the principal Wolfensberger (1970) described as normalization.

Family Size

The size of rural families (especially the culturally deprived) is usually quite large. Family planning is often an obscure art, usually because of ignorance. The astute observer has to realize the relative importance of sex in their lives, lives that do not contain a large number of aesthetic interests. Life frequently centers around such limited concerns as fast cars, guns, music and sex. This is especially true during late adolescence, when opportunities for reproduction are beginning to increase.

Types

There are two broad types of culturally deprived families. There are those who try diligently to provide for their families, but lack the necessary skills to support a large family; and then there are those that do not "give a damn" and rely primarily on the government for support. From an educator's point of view, children from the first group appear much easier to teach (although they may be in the minority).

Population Density, Distance, and Location

Population density, distance, and location are important factors to consider when the delivery of educational services to rural areas is examined. Rural population in some parts of the country is more dense than others. Services for low incidence exceptionalities,

especially the severely and profoundly handicapped, are particularly sensitive to this condition. Distance is a problem in that it reduces communication and increases expense. Coordinators and superintendents can assist matters by periodically getting together and sharing ideas and areas of mutual concern. There is also the problem of locating addresses along rural routes (i.e. Route 1, Box 385) when a concerned teacher attempts to visit the homes of her children's parents.

Transportation

Another variable is that of transportation. The "per child" rate reimbursed by most states is identical for rural and urban areas. Yet the rural children usually live greater distances from the educational setting and therefore should command a larger share of the transportation dollar. Heller (1975) addresses the problem of rural transportation pursuant to service delivery and suggests a combination of bringing the child to the service as well as taking the service to the child, whichever is logistically (or financially) more feasible.

Communication

The minimal availability of mass media in rural areas is another factor that minimizes the impact of a public relations program. Therefore educating the local citizenry to the extent that is necessary to solicit community support is contingent largely on "word-of-mouth" communication. Establishing advisory committees and volunteer groups are excellent means of involving local people.

Discipline

Although a broad generalization, discipline of students in rural schools does not appear to be as severe a problem as it is in the more urban setting. This is particularly true if the system is utilizing a functioning placement committee composed of concerned special educators as well as other appropriate personnel.

Opportunities for Success

Opportunities for success appear to be more prevalent for the marginal student in a rural school. Society is less demanding and generally more accepting. The opportunity to accept responsibility, the willingness for persons to provide neighborly assistance to one another, and genuine concern for human beings, are intangible variables that are difficult to evaluate, but nevertheless, tend to exist with greater frequency in rural areas.

Educational Approaches to Dealing with the Problem

Personnel

The difficulty of attracting qualified teachers to rural areas is a problem of major proportion. The problem is even more pronounced when viewed from the perspective of recruiting practices. Rural school systems generally cannot afford active recruiting programs (like their urban counterparts) and have to rely primarily on a selection from those who happen to apply. Recruiting certified teachers to rural areas is aggravated when a prudent superintendent attempts to eliminate poor teachers by requiring them to return to school for certification in special education. This same superintendent is often reluctant to mention this possibility to his more successful teachers, for fear they might decide on an early retirement.

A possible solution appears to involve recruiting prospective graduate students from established teacher populations that presently exist in rural areas, with the expectation of their returning home upon graduation. A supporting alternative is to provide in-service training to teachers that are presently employed in the rural areas. Undergraduate students appear to gravitate toward larger population centers while graduate students are more likely to return to the rural areas, particularly when they were born and raised in the locale.

Personnel problems also involve the limited number of competent administrators in rural areas who are capable of attracting federal funds for their respective area. The same is true of other specialists such as educational diagnosticians and health care specialists. For example, a deficiency in the quality of prenatal health care of expectant mothers can lead to a significantly high incidence of mental retardation cases.

Vouchers

Vergason (1973) suggested the voucher system as a means of attracting teachers to rural areas. Experienced teachers from metropolis areas where teacher surplusses exist would be given vouchers that would provide reimbursement for travel and other expenses if the teacher were to successfully gain employment in predefined rural areas.

In rural areas where some exceptionalities exist in very low incidence (i.e. deaf-blind) Vergaon also advocated the use of the voucher system. Parents would be given a voucher equilavent to the annual cost of educating a child and would then be charged with the responsibility of securing for the child an appropriate education.

Primary responsibility for the special education program in the

rural area has historically been assigned too frequently to someone whose expertise was in another field of education. This was due to internal school politics or to the absence of a competent special education administrator. This phenomenon appears to be beginning to change, but still occurs on occasion.

Parent Involvement

The educational involvement of the parents of exceptional children and particularly the culturally deprived, is a topic of grave concern. In many instances, parents are a contributing factor to the problem of the child. Parental visitations are a responsibility that every special education teacher should assume. Graduate students in teacher training programs should be required to visit in the homes of their students. Evaluation by graduates of teacher education programs indicates that this is an extremely valuable practice. Asking parents to serve on advisory committees and volunteer organizations may also prove to be a valuable practice.

Low Tax Base

Low population density frequently results in a low tax base. Although property is more abundant in rural areas, it is generally undeveloped and therefore taxed at a lesser rate of assessment. The disproportionate number of poverty level people that reside in rural areas further contribute to the problem. Heller (1975) recognizes this dilemma and suggests that the solution should be a form of differentiated funding by federal and state education agencies.

Head Start

Head Start programs could play a vital role in narrowing the gap between the so-called "normal child" and the exceptional child. Emmanuel (1971) and others have indicated that early intervention

programs have the capability of providing some degree of success in this domain. However, until Head Start recognizes that services to children and not employment of the lower class is the area of greatest need, its contribution will continue to be less than optimal. (This is supported by Head Start staffing figures which indicate that the average teacher has slightly over one year of college training, while the average coordinator has only slightly over two years of college.) This is an example of federal emphasis on the treatment of the problem rather than on prevention of the problem.

Mainstreaming

Resource rooms definitely have a place in the educational spectrum, especially for marginal students, but the value of the self-contained classroom should not be underestimated. This is particularly true for certain exceptionalities such as the trainable mentally retarded, the deaf, and others. Much of the early research reflected negatively on the self-contained class, but this may have been due to poorly prepared teachers or to several other variables. Foster (1971) introducted the idea of a buffer program which he referred to as a Special Needs Resource Room. This program in Jefferson County, Florida, included grades kindergarten through third grade and allowed an in-depth examination of children who were borderline special education students. The program reduced the referral rate to special education classes, cut down the assessment load of the educational diagnostician, and increased the range of student needs they were able to meet. Children who were actually placed in special education were served on a part time basis in kindergarten and first grade, with self-contained classes included in the second and third grade. Incidentally, Harris and Mahan (1975) make a strong

case for a resource teacher, which they define as a well trained cross-categorical specialist who assists the regular teachers in working with handicapped students in the normal classroom.

Multi-System Cooperation

Multi-system cooperation is necessary to meet the needs of low incidence exceptionalities (such as the trainable mentally retarded, the deaf, the visually imapired, etc.) Problems include fiscal responsibility, facilities, transportation, personnel selection, and "modus operandi". The State Education Agency should play a major role in establishing such agreements. Agreements should be in writing whenever possible to prevent misunderstandings, particularly when administrative changes occur. This helps to preserve continuity in delivery of services. Cooperation with respect to in-service training should also be included in such agreements.

A 1969 study by the United States Office of Education in a rural Northwestern section of the country indicated that the quality of educational services can be improved through the sharing of resources. (The same study recognized the need for a more highly developed channel of communication among rural educators).

Ancillary Services

Referrals to and cooperation with related agencies is essential if the rural system is to meet the broad spectrum of needs presented by its exceptional child population. Dietrich (1976) suggested that the need for inter-agency cooperation in rural areas is a critical one, but is often hindered by bureaucratic red tape and professional jealousies. Also, because the tax base is often minimal in a rural area, such systems are often lacking in ancillary resources. This

need mandates the utilization of other agencies such as Vocational Rehabilitation Service, Crippled Children Service, Assocation for Retarded Citizens, Department of Pensions and Security, etc. The advantage that the city systems have had for many years may be equalized to some extent as the courts become more involved in funding patterns.

Miscellaneous

Because of the geographic isolation that is often imposed by the distance between classes, teachers seldom have the opportunity to observe and learn from each other. In order to facilitate communication between teachers, a system may utilize a videotape recorder to visually and auditorally record the typical (and sometimes atypical) behavior of the teachers and the students. These recordings are then shared with other teachers via closed-circuit television during in-service meetings.

In addition, a teacher exchange program may be initiated whereby teachers are permitted to receive classroom exposure to situations other than their own. This exchange program would allow some teachers to be given total responsibility for a different classroom while permitting others to observe in classroom settings that are perceived to be beneficial to them.

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